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ABSTRACT

The extent to which people use exemplars and prototypes when asked to employ a gender stereotype scale to rate characteristics of targets varying in age, race, and gender is explored in this study. The sample consisted of 324 graduate and undergraduate students ranging in age from 19 to 68 with a mean of 29 years, 74% were women and 81% were white. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) was used to rate an individual from 1 of the 12 target groups categorized by race, gender, and age. Subjects assigned a target group that was not categorized by race were asked to specify the race or ethnicity of the person(s) they had in mind when taking the BSRI. Results showed that respondents are more likely to call a personally known exemplar to mind than a generalized prototype when asked to describe a person of young, middle or old age on a widely used rating scale. Respondents are most likely to use prototypes in describing men and women in their late twenties. Results also showed that when the race of a target is unspecified, white respondents almost invariably assume that the target is white. A table showing the percentages for the identity and image that students had in mind when rating persons of various ages is provided. (SR)

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Exemplars, Prototypes, and Gender Stereotypes for
Persons Varying in Age

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Historically, most research on stereotypes associated with different social categories or groups has addressed the content of stereotypes. Recently, research attention has shifted to the process of categorization underlying category stereotypes (Smith, 1990). A currently contentious issue is whether perceivers use category prototypes or whether they use exemplars in accessing the attributes of targets (Srull & Wyer, 1990; Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991). Prototypes are abstract, general knowledge structures or schemas assumed to have been socially learned or abstracted from many past experiences with category members; thus prototypes represent average or typical group members. Brewer, Dull, and Lui's (1981) category types of grandmother, elder statesman, and senior citizen represent old-age prototypes. Exemplars, on the other hand, are specific individuals who, to a greater or lesser extent, differ from the average or typical member of their category. Smith (1990) asserts that prototype models have gained ascendancy in theory and research on social cognition. That is, Smith believes that researchers and theorists now generally assume that prototypes rather than exemplars are used in the process of person perception. Whether people use prototypes or exemplars in the process of person perception is consequential for theories of how to change negative stereotypes. Since prototypes are socially learned or abstracted

from many past experiences with category members, they are viewed as resistant to change (Smith, 1990; Brewer, 1988). Exemplar-based person perceptions, however, are believed to be more amenable to change.

Our study asks the question, to what extent do people use exemplars and to what extent do they use prototypes when asked to employ standard attribute scales (in this study, a gender stereotype scale) to rate the characteristics of targets varying in age and gender?

Method

The sample consisted of 324 graduate and undergraduate students. Their ages ranged from 19 to 68, with a mean of 29 years; 74% were women, and 81% were White.

The students were told that we were interested in their perceptions of psychological health. Then, each student used the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) to rate a "mature, healthy, socially competent" individual in one of 12 target groups (a Black or race-unspecified man, woman, or adult in their late 20s, late 40s, or late 60s). At the end of the questionnaire those assigned a race-unspecified target were asked to specify the race or ethnicity of the person(s) they had in mind when marking the 60 BSRI personality traits. All respondents were asked to focus on the image of the person or persons they had in mind when they were marking the BSRI characteristics and to specify who they were describing: themselves, a relative, a friend, a real person less well known than a friend, a real person not personally known (such as a media figure), a fictional person (e.g., a character on TV), a

hypothetical or ideal person, no one in particular, or a combination of two or more persons. The last three response categories are assumed to represent prototypes, while the first six categories, from "myself" through a fictional person, are assumed to represent exemplars.

Results

First, when we asked those rating race-unspecified targets to specify the race or ethnicity of the person(s) they had in mind, 94.4% of White respondents stated that they had a White person in mind. In contrast, only 36% of minority respondents stated that they had someone of their own race or ethnicity in mind.

For this paper we analyzed data for the 264 race-unspecified targets only. (To date we have data on 60 Black targets, not enough to analyze herein. We will collect more Black-target data in February 1991.) Almost all race-unspecified targets were viewed as White; henceforth we will refer to these targets as White.

Gender of target was unrelated to the differential use of exemplars and prototypes. Age of target, however, was significantly related to the differential use of exemplars and prototypes, $t = 40.45$, $p < .01$, as shown in Table 1. Age-of-target differences in the use of either a relative as exemplar or a generalized prototype (a hypothetical person or "no one in particular") are noteworthy. Nine percent of those rating a young target, 38% of those who rated a middle-aged target, and 53% of those who rated an old target said that they were rating a relative. Conversely, a generalized prototype was used by 51% of those rating young targets, 36% of those rating middle-aged

targets, and only 26% of those rating old targets.

Discussion

The basic question we posed was: When respondents rate a generally described target using a standard stereotype scale such as the BSRI, are they using a prototype or are they using an exemplar? Clearly, researchers who have focused on the content of stereotypes attributed to social categories differing in age, gender, and race have usually assumed a prototype model, for stereotypes themselves are often defined as structured sets of beliefs (cf. Ashmore & Del Boca, 1986) related to prototypes. Our findings suggest, however, that when asked to describe a young, middle-aged, or old man or woman on a widely-used rating scale, respondents are more likely to call a personally-known exemplar to mind than a generalized prototype. But some do appear to call a typical prototype to mind. Exemplars and prototypes are both used, but exemplars are used by more perceivers than are prototypes. A mixed model using both group level and exemplar representations most adequately captures our findings.

Respondents are most likely to use prototypes rather than exemplars in describing men and women in their late 20s--half of those rating young targets used a prototype. Many respondents were themselves in their late 20s, and we were surprised that so few rated the characteristics of friends. In contrast only one-quarter of those rating men or women in their late 60s called a generalized prototype to mind while one-half described a relative, often a grandparent. Family members represent highly personalized images or exemplars of aging. Our findings suggest that many people

espouse a "grandparent theory of healthy aging" which may not be extended to many other old people.

Finally, our findings indicate that when the race of a target is unspecified, White respondents almost invariably assume that the target is White. In our increasingly multicultural society it is essential for person perception researchers to be aware that the social category concepts of race and ethnicity are consequential for person perceptions, whether or not ethnicity is explicitly built into the research design.

Table 1

Percentages for the Identity of the Image Students Had in Mind When Rating Young, Middle-Aged, and Old Race-Unspecified Targets on the BSRI (N=264)

Image Respondent Was Describing	Age of Target Categories		
	Late 20s (<u>n</u> =78)	Late 40s (<u>n</u> =91)	Late 60s (<u>n</u> =95)
Myself	13%	2%	5%
A Relative	9	38	53
A Friend	8	8	4
Acquaintance, etc.	12	10	7
Real but not personally known, or fictional character	4	5	4
Hypothetical ideal or No One in Particular	51	36	26

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